DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 734 CS 202 587

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TITLE An Analysis of Reader-Interest and Readership of the Advertising Content of a Small Daily Newspaper.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (Ottawa, Ontario, August 16-19, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Information Dissemination; Journalism; Local Issues; *Newspapers; *Publicize; *Reading Interests

ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper was designed to determine how consumers perceive the newspaper and how they use it; specifically, how well read is newspaper advertising and how do readers of a small daily newspaper feel about advertising content. A team of trained, paid interviewers collected data in two waves, one week apart, from a random sample of the newspaper's subscribers. Results showed that subscribers use the local newspaper for local information--both news and advertising, that they are most interested in local news and features, that they want more local information, that they would be disappointed to see any local content eliminated or reduced, and that they view advertising as a source of local news. Tables of findings are included. (JM)

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An Analysis of Reader-Interest and Readership of the Advertising Content of a Small Daily Newspaper

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Submitted to the Advertising Division of the Association
for Education in Journalism, Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada, August 16-20, 1975

CS 202 587

ABSTRACT: Ernest F. Larkin, Gerald L. Grotta, and Barbara De Plois
"An Analysis of Reader-Interest and Readership of the
Advertising Content of a Small Daily Newspaper."

Some of the questions concerning interest in, and utilization of, the advertising content of the small daily newspaper have been addressed in a recent study of a small daily Oklahoma newspaper.

Results of the study indicate that the advertising content of this newspaper is viewed as local news by its subscribers and consequently has the highest readership of any type of content in this paper. While it was assumed that the advertising content of this newspaper would be well-read, the magnitude of readership and reader-interest in advertising was surprising.

Findings from this study clearly indicate that readers of the small daily newspaper rely on the advertising content to keep them informed on not only where to shop but also to keep them up-to-date on occurrences in the local community which may not be covered in the regular news columns of the paper. Classified advertising, for example, had the highest readership of any single item in the newspaper with respondents indicating that they read the classified regularly as a means of keeping up-to-date on local events.

In regard to questions concerning the readers attitude toward the amount of advertising carried by the newspaper under study, it was found that rather than feeling there was too much advertising in the paper, the majority felt that it was either "just right" or that they wanted more advertising in the future.

Thus, it appears that the small daily newspaper plays a unique role in its community and is perceived by its readers as the primary source of local shopping news.

An Analysis of Reader-Interest and Readership of the Advertising Content of a Small Daily Newspaper

By

Ernest F. Larkin, Gerald L. Grotta, and Barbara De Plois[1]

Advertisers, publishers, and students of mass communications have all voiced a concern at one time or another over the interest in, and utilization of, the advertising content of the daily newspapers. Numerous studies have been conducted in an effort to provide insights into these questions, the most recent of which is the study conducted under the auspices of the American Association of Advertising Agencies and reported in the March 29 issue of Editor and Publisher.[2] This study, designed to update trends established in a benchmark study conducted for the Four-A's in 1964, polled the opinions of 1,803 persons drawn at random in a nationwide probability sample.[3]

The results of this poll indicated that not only is the "newspaper in the United States the best liked advertising medium," but it is also "accorded the highest level of endorsement as an institution with advertising a close second."[4] While this poll represents the opinions of newspaper readers

in general it does not distinguish between readers of large metropolitan dailies and small community daily and/or weekly newspapers as to potential differences of opinion concerning the advertising content of their newspapers.

While other studies have concentrated on the overall interest in, and utilization of, the community newspaper, none have concentrated their attention on the advertising in these newspapers. For example, a study by Bogart and Orenstein concentrated on the ways in which the newspaper reflects the patterns of movement by individuals in small communities and the degree of community identity they exhibit.[5] A study by Bradley S. Greenberg studied the community press as perceived by its editors and readers.[6] Both studies were designed to gain insights into the interest in, and utilization of, the community newspaper by its readers, but did not specifically break out information on advertising.

The following study was designed to determine how consumers perceive the newspaper and how they use it. While it incorporated several dimensions of reader-interest and readership including: (1) where subscribers say they get various kinds of information; (2) what kinds of content subscribers say they read most regularly in the newspaper; (3) actual readership recall of test issues of the newspaper; (4) reader desires for changes in the amounts of various kinds of information in the newspaper; and (5) intensity of reader interest in various kinds of content. It also provided an opportunity to investigate the interest in, and utilization of, advertising content. Information on the other dimensions have been reported elsewhere.[7] However, the information on advertising was considered of sufficient interest and importance to report separately.

The Problem

In an effort to determine the functions of the small daily newspaper in today's society an attempt was made to determine how consumers perceive the newspaper and how they use it. To gain information regarding the consumers' perceptions of the small daily newspaper and their expressed interest in and use of its news and advertising content, an in-depth study was undertaken with a random sample of subscribers to a small daily newspaper in Oklahoma. Aspects of several previous studies were combined in an effort to probe more deeply the question outlined above.

With regard to the advertising content of the newspaper, two broad questions were of particular interest: (1) how well-read is newspaper advertising--how does it fare compared to other features such as national and international news, columns and editorials, or the comic page; and (2) how do the readers of the small daily newspaper feel about advertising content--do they think there is too much, not enough, or is it about the right amount?

Methodology

A random sample of subscribers to the newspaper was drawn from the subscription list. A team of trained, paid interviewers collected the data in two waves, one week apart. In all, 106 usable interviews were obtained from 71 households. This represented 2.83 per cent of the households in the city as reported by the 1970 U.S. Census and 1.67 per cent of the total population. The profile of the sample was almost identical to the over-all population characteristics in the 1970 Census.

Respondents were not informed that the study involved the local daily newspaper, and the first mention of the newspaper was made in Question 7, when

interviewers asked about frequency of readership of 34 regular feature items in the newspaper. All data on sources of various types of information had been collected prior to this mention of the local daily newspaper.

Results

Results in all phases of the study were remarkably consistent. Subscribers use the local newspaper for local information--both news and advertising. They are most interested in local news and features. The best read content is local. They want more local information. They would be most disappointed to see any local content eliminated or reduced. And they most often mentioned local items as types of content they would specifically like to see added to the newspaper.

Based on previous studies, interest in local content was expected. However, the magnitude of that interest and the great consistency with which it emerged from all phases of the study were surprising.

Advertising Readership

While it was assumed that the advertising content of the newspaper under study would be well-read, the magnitude of readership and reader-interest in advertising was also surprising. From the data on "sources of information" in which respondents were asked "Where do you get most of your news about: (a) national-international events? (b) state events? (c) local events? (d) where to shop?" the newspaper emerged as the predominant source of information on where to shop, with 64.2 per cent of the respondents mentioning newspapers and 34.0 per cent specifically mentioning by name the newspaper under study, even though this information was not requested. These figures compared

with 8.5 per cent for radio and 4.7 per cent for television. Results are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Even more surprising than the information on advertising as a source of shopping news was the fact that advertising had the highest average readership of any type of content in the readership-recall phase of the study. The average readership for advertisements was 31.24 per cent, followed by local items with 27.44 per cent. The next highest category, features, was only 16.13 per cent. See summary in Table 2.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Advertising Is Local News

The results of this study clearly indicate that the readers of the small daily newspaper view advertising as a source of local news. It provides them with information on where to shop, and also keeps them informed on events and activities of a local nature. This finding was further reinforced by the response to questions concerning the readership of classified advertising. In this study the classifieds had one of the highest readerships of any type of content with 47.50 per cent. Many respondents commented that they read the classified ads regularly as a means of gaining information concerning the local events and occurrences which may not receive attention in the regular news columns of the paper.

In an effort to gain additional information on the use of advertising by the readers of this newspaper, the respondents were asked to name the five

stores where they did most of their shopping. A total of 57 different stores were mentioned, but only 17 of these were mentioned by five or more respondents. Of the top 17 stores, the leader was mentioned by 78.30 per cent of all respondents, while the second was mentioned by 72.26 per cent and the third by 61.32 per cent. In all, a total of five stores were mentioned by over 25 per cent of all respondents. Results are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Although no direct cause-effect relationship should be inferred, it is interesting to note that of the five stores mentioned most often, all had one or more advertisements that ranked in the top 39 items in readership in this study. No other stores had advertisements that ranked in the top 39 items. These five stores were also identified as among the advertisers using the greatest amount of advertising space in the local newspaper.

In further support of the contention that advertising is considered local news by the readers of the small daily newspaper is the fact that of the top 39 items with 33 per cent or higher readership recall, 20 were local stories or items, 11 were local advertisements, 3 were state stories, 3 were national stories and 2 were syndicated feature items. This would also tend to support the findings of the Four-A study in which respondents indicated that there is a growing feeling in the U.S. that advertising is essential and provides a definite consumer benefit.[8]

Reader Satisfaction with Advertising

It is often assumed that the average newspaper reader, if asked his opinion concerning the amount of advertising carried in the local newspaper,

would almost certainly respond by saying that there is too much advertising and not enough news or feature material. This assumption is not supported by the data from this study.

When asked if they would prefer to see "more," "less" or "the same" amount of advertising in their local newspaper, 20.8 per cent of the respondents indicated they would like to see more advertising, while only 9.4 per cent indicated they would like to see less. The vast majority (69.8 per cent) indicated they were satisfied with the amount now carried by this newspaper. See summary in Table 4.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Findings of this nature would tend to indicate that even though the public may feel there is too much advertising on television or radio (as evidenced by the growing reports of complaints against "commercial clutter"), this attitude does not hold for the audience of the small daily newspaper. Their perception of advertising in the local newspaper as local news may tend to set this content in a more favorable light. Support for this has also been found in the Four-A's study mentioned earlier in which it is reported that "research suggests that television commercials are most likely to color the consumers' opinion of advertising."[9]

Summary and Conclusions

From the data gathered in this study it would appear that the small daily newspaper plays a unique and important role in its community. It is perceived by its readers as the primary source of local news and is relied

upon to keep these readers up-to-date on local events. It is also perceived as the primary source of local shopping news and is relied upon by its readers for information concerning where to shop. It is not perceived to be in competition with the other media entering the community but is rather seen as working in conjunction with these other media, each of which apparently provide their own unique contribution to the total news and information package available to the public.

This finding tends to support evidence gathered in a number of other studies of the community newspaper. For example, Bogart and Orenstein report in their study that "this study adds to the body of literature which shows that media serve complimentary rather than competing functions for the public. The weekly newspaper of the local community is not in competition with the surrounding dailies. It provides a different kind of coverage and focus of interest than the dailies do."[10]

The advertising content of the local newspaper is perceived as local news by the readers who rely on it for information on not only where to shop, but also for information concerning events in the community which may not be covered in the regular news columns of the paper. And, from this point of view, the readers are either satisfied with the amount of advertising now being carried by their newspaper or are more apt to ask for more, rather than less, advertising in the future.

Footnotes

1. Dr. Larkin and Dr. Grotta are Associate Professors of Journalism at the University of Oklahoma and Miss De Plois is a Graduate Assistant in the Journalism Research Center.
2. Staff, "Newspapers are Public's Favorite Ad Medium," Editor and Publisher, March 29, 1975, p. 12.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Bogart, Leo and Frank E. Orenstein, "Mass Media and Community Identity in an Interurban Setting," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring 1965), pp. 179-189.
6. Greenberg, Bradley S., "Community Press as Perceived by Its Editors and Readers," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 3, (Summer 1964), pp. 179-188.
7. Grotta, Gerald L., Ernest F. Larkin, and Barbara De Plois, "Home-Town Daily Newspaper Means 'Local' to Readers," Oklahoma Journalism Reports, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 1975), pp. 1-4.
8. Editor and Publisher staff, op. cit., p. 12.
9. Ibid.
10. Bogart and Orenstein, op cit., p. 188.

Table 1. Source of Shopping News

Source	Per Cent Mentioning
Local Newspaper*	34.0
Newspaper	64.2
Radio	8.5
Television	4.7

*Mentioned Local Newspaper by Name.

Table 2. Readership of Newspaper Content

Type of Content	Per Cent Readership
Advertising	31.24
Local News	27.44
Features	16.13
State News	15.33
National-International News	13.27

Table 3. Stores Mentioned in Rank Order

Store Rank	Per Cent of Total Mentioning
1.	78.30
2.	62.26
3.	61.32
4.	36.68
5.	32.08
6.	21.70
7.	16.98
8.	14.15
9.	13.21
10.	8.49
11.	8.49
12.	7.55
13.	6.60
14.	6.60
15.	5.66
16.	4.72
17.	4.72

Table 4. Desire for Ad Content

Content Level	Per Cent Indicating
Less	9.4
Same	69.8
More	20.8